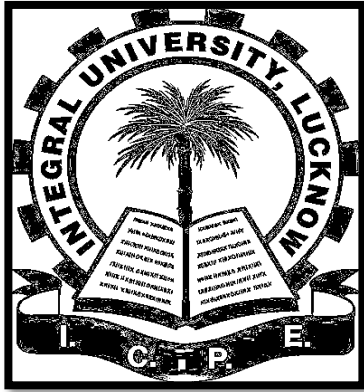# IMAGE OF WOMEN
IN FILMS

Integral
University

Image of Woman in Films

A project submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for Advanced Professional Communication

By

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Introduction

Feminism is the most visible movement in film criticism today, and the most dominant trend in that movement is psychoanalytically informed. Psychoanalytic feminism came to this position in film studies at very latest by the early to mid-eighties.

Before the consolidation and ascendency of this particular variety of feminism, earlier approaches to the study of women and film included the search for a suppressed canon of women filmmakers---a feminist version of the *auteur* theory---and the study of the image of women in films, primarily the image of women in films by men.
Neither of these approaches mandated a reliance on psychoanalysis, through of course, one could pursue these research programs while also embracing psychoanalysis.

Clearly, the study of the image of women in film could proceed without commitment to psychoanalytic theory. However, that is not what happened. As a participant in the evolution of film theory and history, my own sense is that the

project of studying the image of women in film was superseded by psychoanalysis due to feeling that this project, as participated by early feminists, suffered from being too naively empirical.

It appeared to involve meandering from genre to genre, from period to period, and even from film to film, accumulating a mass of observations which however interesting, were also thought to be theoretically rag-tag. Psychoanalysis, in contrast, provided a means to incorporate many of the scattered insights.

Role and Influence of Media

Media plays a big role of influencing the people's daily lives this is because it influences how people view the world in general. Mass media is an agent of socialization and from this role; it has been attacked by an array of criticism from different portions of the society.

There is a wide range of media among them television shows, movies, the radio, newspapers, advertisements and many more. In these many forms of media, there are images of men and women. These images are depicted in different ways and with different characteristics and having different meanings. Social psychologists suggest that these images often alter the way people perceive the social realities. *Manatu*, (2003) argues that these images can therefore play a very crucial role in stimulating antisocial behaviors such as violence, crime and delinquency among others.

To people such as the critical feminists, mass media is seen as an agent of male chauvinism. This systematically depicts a male dominated socio-cultural, political and economic order.

These depictions come about from the continuous reinforcement of the negative gender role stereotype of women.

Research has been made on a variety of movies in order to analyze the gender representation in movies. This study will analyze the forms and patterns of portrayal of women and their gender roles in Nollywood movies and in Hollywood movies.

In Nollywood, two movies, Ije and Mr. and Mrs. Both acted in 2012 will be analyzed. *Sex in the City 1* and *2* will also be analyzed. The results obtained will help shed light on how" the man" and" the woman" are perceived.

The findings from the chosen movies revealed that women were perceived as the weaker sex and, consequently, as sex objects suggesting that women are stereotyped in the various films and movies.

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory and Cultivation Theory lay the foundation for understanding audience interpretations of how gender and race are represented in film. The Social Cognitive Theory suggests that people develop expectations for real-world situations from observational learning while consuming media.

In their 2009 study analyzing the representation of relationships in top grossing romantic comedies, authors Johnson and Holmes found evidence to support the ideas of Social Cognitive Theory when they determined that people "look to relationships presented in film to learn what to expect from real-life relationships".

Through observation, retention, then reenactment, people perpetuate the rewards and punishments that result from behaviors learned through the media.

Bussey and Bandura (1999) point out that: Gender development is a fundamental issue because some of the

most important aspects of people's lives, such as the talents they cultivate, the conceptions they hold of themselves and 6 others, the sociostructural opportunities and constraints they encounter, and the social life and occupational paths they pursue are heavily prescribed by societal gender-typing.

Rather than providing realistic representations in the media, men and women both tend to be depicted in a hyper-traditional manner, which maintains stereotypes of personality traits, capabilities, and aspirations.

Additionally, Social Cognitive Theory is not confined to one period of life like previous research. Bussey and Bandura argue that the perception of gender role and development is continually influenced by social factors throughout life for both sexes.

Cultivation Theory also reveals that representations in the media affect audience's perceptions of reality, but more passively. The theory proposes that continuous exposure to specific cultural messages will influence how the audience identifies with that message in the long-term.

Previous research suggested overall interaction with general media would influence audience perceptions; however, Johnson and Holmes found that genre-specific exposure is much more likely to change beliefs and expectations.

Movie theaters in the United States had three times higher attendance than all theme parks and professional sports events combined in 201. So it is reasonable to assert that vast numbers of movie-goers are receiving those specific cultural messages, and the perpetuations of these themes regarding gender roles, which are depicted across genres in the top grossing films, are reaching a huge audience.

The Bechdel Test for film is not based in theory, but is a litmus test for examining how well-rounded and complete are the representations of women in media. Created in 1985 by cartoonist Alison Bechdel, the test asks only three questions:

1) Are there at least two women in the film who have names?
2) Do those women talk to each other?
3) Do they talk to each other about something other than a man?

The films that fail the test fail more often due to lack of female characters, not always because of stereotyping females as being male-dependent. Though the test seems simple to pass, only 17 of the 50 top grossing films of 2013 met those three criteria.

As the Bechdel Test is only a litmus test for character representations and meant to bring attention to a lack of complex characters, since its popularization authors have been adapting the test to measure other underrepresented character groups such as ethnic minorities and characters of varying sexual orientations.

Author Alaya Johnson of the blog, The Angry Black Woman, wrote a post constructing a Bechdel Test for people of color in popular fiction.

The test asked the same questions, but regarding people of color:

1) Does the work have at least two people of color in it? 2) Who talk to each other?
3) About something other than a white person (2009)?

While Johnson was primarily considering television fiction, she and commenters still had trouble discerning very many examples of science-fiction/fantasy shows that pass the test.

Considering the original Bechdel Test, as well as its variations in future research, and indeed in future production decisions regarding the media, will further expose the discrepancy in well-rounded minority characters and hopefully work toward its retribution

Theoretical Approaches to Gender Paradigm

Social constructivism is an ontological viewpoint harboring the basic idea that the world has a social foundation suggesting that the world is socially constructed. This is about the social order on how people perceive the world and how they distinguish between rights and wrong.

It is crucial to note that gender roles have been constructed interestingly in the set movies. Language is the main medium through which humans interact since it creates meaning.

According to Hall theory, language is neither the property of the sender nor the receiver of meanings. When shared language produces meaning and this is when representation takes place. Another approach to gender paradigm is the discursive approach. This particular approach was influenced by *Michael Faoulcault* and it spins around the production of knowledge and meaning.

Portrayal of Women in Hindi Cinemas (Bollywood)

Certainly, the portrayal of women in Hindi cinema has come a long way from the early days when men played women's roles and the profession was completely taboo for women. Today, while pay parity is still far from reality, women occupy spaces within the industry both behind and in front of the camera. Yet, the Hindi film industry and its stories remain male-dominated.

The power of a male star continues to determine a movie's journey; stories are written with male actors in mind and often amended to ensure greater box-office traction.

A 2014 study, 'Gender Bias Without Borders: An Investigation of Female Characters in Popular Films', which was conducted across 11 countries, assessed that the lowest percentages of female characters on screen were found in movies from India (24.9 per cent) and USA/UK (23.6 per cent). This compared to higher percentages of 37.1 per cent in Brazil and 35.9 per cent in South Korea.

Having said that, it would be fair to say, the industry has come a long way. From the stereotypical representations of mother, wife and sister with idealistic qualities inspired by characters from Hindu mythology and a mother-figure fixation, or vamps, women in Hindi cinema are no longer solely painted in black and white.

Over the years, one can single out films that broke the mould- *Arth* (1982), *Fire* (1996), *Daman* (2001), *Lajja* (2001), *7 Khoon Maaf* (2011) and *Queen* (2013), to name a few. Even in 2017, the sub textual themes are similar. In this year's Secret Superstar, for example, a young girl breaks the shackles of patriarchy and uses technology to rebel and chase her dreams.

The *Aamir Khan* starrer *Dangal* spotlighted how the right attitude and nurturing can level out the playing field for both genders, while *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) subverted and pushed notions of women's desires and aspirations in modern times.

Rise in Female-Centric Movies in Bollywood

A recent study conducted by IBM and two Indian educational institutes titled 'Analyzing Gender Stereotyping in Bollywood Movies' observed occupation distribution of males and females in Hindi cinema. It should come as no surprise, however, that while male characters were playing lawyers, doctors and gangsters, among others, female characters were teachers, secretaries and students.

In the last few years, though, we have seen a widening of this space too, with female characters playing detectives, boxers, cable TV operators, politicians, journalists, marketing managers, gangsters, bank robbers and secret service agents.

The same study also found that since 2000, the percentage of female-centric movies has seen a rise, from a low of 6.9 per cent in 1995-2000 to 11.9 per cent in 2015-'17.

In an industry that produces more than 200 films a year, it is still possible to earmark those featuring women in positions

that influence the narrative and capture the zeitgeist. But these films often struggle to find favor with audiences, unless nudged along by controversy married with strong content, as in the case of *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. Biopics with a top star headlining can be a shoo-in, as *Mary Kom* (2014) was, but more often than not, the male-dominated audience prefers films championed by *Salman Khan, Aamir Khan, Akshay Kumar* or *Shah Rukh Khan*.

Toilet: Ek Prem Katha, which tackled the unconventional story of a woman walking out on her husband and refusing to return till he built her a private toilet, was one of 2017's biggest hits. The film starred *Akshay Kumar* and *Bhumi Pednekar*. But according to sources, the initial script that was based on the true story of a woman's protest was amended to present Kumar as the hero.

This kind of grandstanding is endemic in the Hindi film industry, and female-led stories, where the women are capable of fixing their own problems, find few backers.

And even the most successful women film-makers in the Hindi film industry, such as *Farah Khan* and Zoya Akhtar, tend

to make films with a male gaze. Examine the characters in Hindi movies closely — where are the action heroines, and the women who stand by their actions without weeping buckets of regret?

As the millennials begin to turn inwards towards the small screen, seeking edgy content that walks alongside international productions, it will be interesting to see if content created for streaming services succeeds where Hindi cinema has fallen short and bridges the gaping gender gap.

With a handful of female directors and screenwriters, the Hindi film industry is largely viewed from the male gaze and driven by box-office returns, which are pegged on hero worship. Besides *Tapsee Pannu, Deepika Padukone, Vidya Balan, Swara Bhaskar* and *Radhika Apte,* no other female actor is seen as able enough to command an 'opening' solely on her own star power.

Analysis

Men and women perform different roles and at times these roles do not hold true for all individuals. However, a majority of people live in accordance with these roles. Society assigns classes of social roles to both male and female individuals, in the same manner that society views the different sexes.

These gender roles can be a hindrance to both men and women as they can limit the capabilities of what males and females can do. Gender roles can actually enslave individuals as they can force them to be what others want them to be.

Through social tyranny, the society will suppress the choices of males and females pushing them into certain behavioral modes, personality characteristics and occupational roles as approved by the society.

Men will, therefore, have an opportunity to develop their talents (*Busby*, 2005) while women will be denied such an opportunity. For instance, Indian films depict women as housekeepers who need to bear enough heirs for the family.

They also show that women should not have career but the men are portrayed as being able and learned who enjoy white collar jobs.

This will in turn discourage women from schooling and formal education thus limiting their career choices to those careers which do not require too much time outside the family home.

Literature Review of Women in Films

In 2013, women comprised less than a third of speaking parts in the top grossing domestic films, and only 15% of protagonists. But due to the success of several high profile female-led films in recent years, "there is a growing disconnect...between what we might perceive as being the current status of women in film and their actual status," said Dr. Martha Lauzen, the executive director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University.

The truth is, even in the latest films, female characters are two times more likely than males to be identified only by a life-related role rather than a work-related role, they are consistently younger than their male counterparts, and they are rarely portrayed as formal leaders.

The recent popularity of strong female heroines such as *Katniss Everdeen* in the *Hunger Games* series and *Tris* in *The Divergent* series may lend to the impression that women are often being represented equally and fairly in films.

David Gautlett said in his 2002 book Media, Gender and Identity that "the traditional views of a woman as a housewife or low status worker has been kick-boxed out of the picture by the feisty, successful 'girl power' icons".

However, research is still revealing that women are overwhelmingly valued in film based on their identification as a mother, wife, or lover.

The other side, maintaining more values from the previous wave of feminism, argues that power will never be reached until women are equally depicted on film in age standards, in positions of leadership, and by distinction of extra-familial aspirations, among other inequalities.

Objectification

Objectification Theory provides the theoretical framework for a majority of the research that has been conducted on the sexualization of women in the last decade.

Frederickson and Roberts research reveals that being female may create a shared social experience in that women are constantly exposed to the objectification of the female body and often internalize the observer's gaze, which affects their mental health.

Using Objectification Theory as a guide, *Aubrey and Frisby* (2012) examined body exposure and dresses of female artists in their music videos to determine how self-objectification of artists varied between race and genre in a content analysis of the top 10 "Hot 100" Billboard songs.

The average number of body parts shown by each artist was not significantly different between races, but when these results are considered alongside research of advertising *(APA Task Force, 2010)* and television *(Glascock & Ruggiero, 2004)*, these studies reveal that

women are significantly more sexually objectified than men in the media.

There is little available concrete research comparing how women of different races are sexualized in film, however, authors *Smith, Choueiti,* and *Pieper* did touch on the issue in their 2014 study, "Race/Ethnicity in 600 Popular Films."

The authors only looked at films from 2013 and defined sexualization as percent of women in sexualized clothing (tight or revealing attire) and percent of women with some exposed skin.

Methodology

The sample used for the original content analysis of the sexual objectification (amount of visible skin) of leading and supporting female characters of the four major ethnicities comprises the three domestic top grossing, live-action movies from 2013, 2008, 2003, 1998, and 1993.

Top grossing movies were chosen as an indicator of audience preference and to avoid bias toward, or limiting the study to, any specific genre.

The movies were determined by their box office ranking with being the highest-grossing live-action film of that year, and 2nd and 3rd highest-grossing live-action films of that year, respectively.

The five-year intervals over a 20-year span were chosen to show the change, if any, of depictions of women over time, while keeping the study concise in its examination of 15 films versus the 63 top grossing films from all the years between 1993 and 2013.

Data from top grossing films 1993-2013

Year	Film	Protagonist	Female Characters	Studio
1993	Jurassic Park	Male & female	One minor female character	Universal
	Mrs. Doubtfire	Male	One supporting, two minor female characters	Fox
	The Fugitive	Male	Two supporting female characters	Warner Bros.
1998	Armageddon	Male	One supporting, one minor female character	Buena Vista
	There's Something about Mary	Male	One supporting, one minor female character	Fox
2003	The Lords of the Rings : The Return of the King	Male main characters	Two minor female characters	New Line Cinema
	Pirates of the Caribbean : The Curse of the Black Pearl	Male	One supporting female character, One minor character	Buena Vista
	The Matrix Reloaded	Male	Two supporting female characters, Four minor female characters	Warner Bros.

2008	The Dark Knight	Male	One supporting female, One minor female character	Warner Bros.
	Iron Man	Male	One supporting female character	Paramount
	Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	Male	Two supporting female characters	Paramount
2013	The Hunger Games : Catching Fire	Female	One supporting female and four minor female characters	Lionsgate
	Iron Man 3	Male	Two female supporting, One minor female characters	Buena Vista
	Man of Steel	Male	Two female supporting, One minor character	Warner Bros.

Discussion

Examining the top grossing films over a 20-year span revealed that women are seeing greater representation in roles valued for their intelligence, their strength, and their independence more frequently in later films than in earlier films, but that they are still not as well-rounded, or as important, as the men.

As previously noted, these representations could be due in part to the influence of post-feminism, which would claim that the female characters in these stereotypical roles chose to be where they are.

Post-feminist theory would say that Laura Dern's character in Jurassic Park (who is a brilliant scientist who does not rely on her husband) and Liv Tyler's character in Armageddon (who has a career because of her father's business, and is more focused on her romance with Ben Affleck's character than her own career or potential) are both equally feminist because they chose their own paths.

Neither is more right or wrong than the other because neither was forced into her situation by an oppressive patriarchal system (mainly because that oppressive system no longer exists because the women's movement wiped it out, according to postfem theory).

Third-wave feminist theory, however, would say this is not correct because Laura Dern's situation is not the norm. Liv Tyler's character spends most of the film wrapped in Ben Affleck's arms, or crying over his absence, so the fact that she has a career and is an intelligent woman who stands up for herself against her father is all secondary to her character, and is therefore an emblematic representation of how women continue to be portrayed in film.

So, while the argument can be made that women are being portrayed as more balanced and complex characters in later films, for those women who do appear on screen, gender stereotypes regarding personality characteristics as well as familial and career roles are still the norm in the most popular films.

Conclusion

Gender representation in media influences how people perceive gender issues since some specific gender roles uplift and strengthen the images of men. These movies clearly show the gender power structure where men are depicted as the stronger sex.

Although some women in movies are portrayed as being strong and independent, they cannot dispute the evident gender power structure.

Gender and racial stereotypes in film are not dead, but they are making progress. The demographics of the audience and their actual preferences should be considered more seriously in production decisions to influence more positive representations and to be more inclusive to the national audience, not just the white males.

Calling for a lack of, or turn away from, action/adventure films because they promote hyper-masculinity is not the answer. The answer is pursuing depictions that more accurately represent the audience as a whole.

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